

October 21, 2008

House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA
United Kingdom

Dear Member of Parliament,

On October 22, Members of Parliament will have the opportunity to vote on the final amendments to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill.

As you are aware, these amendments include several that could smooth the path for women seeking to access early abortions, thereby reducing the stress often associated with the delays that can occur at the moment. These may include amendments extending abortion rights to women in Northern Ireland; changing the consent form so that only one doctor's signature is required; permitting qualified health-care providers other than doctors to perform abortions; increasing the number of medical facilities that may perform abortions; allowing women to take the medication prescribed for early medical abortions in their own home; banning misleading advertisements placed by antichoice organisations; and requiring doctors to prescribe contraception.

In discussions about how to vote on these issues, as occurred previously in the debates on time limits, considerable attention has been paid to the vocal but minority views of the Catholic hierarchy. In late September, as part of its campaign to influence votes on this issue, the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales released a two-page leaflet calling on Catholics to contact their MPs to oppose these common-sense changes to the law, describing them as "extreme proposals."

The United Kingdom's 40 Catholic bishops may accurately represent their own interpretation of Catholic teachings, but they do not accurately represent the totality of those teachings, nor do they represent the views or practices of all 5.5 million Catholics in the UK.

Catholic MPs can rest assured that they are in good company, and can—in good conscience—support prochoice policies. Church teachings on moral decision-making and abortion are complex and far more nuanced than the monolithic teachings the bishops present. In Catholic theology there is room for the acceptance of policies that favor access to the full range of reproductive health options, including contraception and abortion.

For example, despite what many conservative Catholics may want us to believe, there is no firm position within the Catholic church on when the fetus becomes a person. In its last definitive statement on abortion, the 1974 *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, the Vatican acknowledged that it does not know when the fetus becomes a person: "There is not a unanimous tradition on this point and authors are as yet in disagreement."

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teachings have been declared infallible: the Immaculate Conception of Mary; the Assumption of Mary; and the declaration on infallibility itself.

At the heart of church teachings on moral matters is a deep regard for an individual's conscience. The *Catechism* states that "a human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience." Catholic teaching holds that when the church cannot speak definitively on a matter of fact, the consciences of individual Catholics must be primary and respected.

In addition to church teachings allowing room for support of prochoice policies, recent polling shows that another important element of Catholic teaching, the role the faithful play in confirming controversial teachings, has not been fulfilled. Repeatedly, polls of Catholics in the UK and abroad show that when it comes to matters related to reproductive health, Catholics go their own way, more closely mirroring the views of society at large than the minority views of the Catholic bishops.

For example, a YouGov poll for Catholics for Choice last November showed that a third more Catholics agreed than disagreed with the statements: "It should be legal for a woman to have an abortion when she has an unwanted pregnancy" and "Catholic bishops concentrate too much of their attention on abortion when there are other issues that also require their attention." In fact, the results showed that all faith groups polled support access to legal abortion. Similarly, recent CFC polls in the United States, Mexico and Bolivia have found that majorities of Catholics support a woman's right to access abortion, as do other polls of Catholics in Canada, France, Germany and Spain.

Catholics, like other people of faith, support policies that enable women and men to make the decisions that affect their own lives and the lives of their families. The proposed amendments of the HFE bill are based on good practice and sound medicine. Reducing the barriers placed in the way of women who have already decided to have an abortion makes good sense, both for the woman and her family as well as for the equitable provision of health-care services.

In addition, it would make good sense to see more work done to prevent unplanned pregnancies in the first place and assist women seeking to continue such pregnancies to term. Improving access to quality and affordable contraception is a first step. For women who decide to continue a pregnancy, reducing the staggering costs of childcare and pre- and postnatal health care is a vital move. Providing comprehensive sexuality education for young people is also a key element of a long-term, forward-looking, national health-care strategy.

Catholic teachings on the primacy of conscience hold that the individual Catholic must follow his or her conscience—even if it is in conflict with church teaching. In addition, Catholic teaching requires at least tolerance if not respect for another person's decision. Catholic parliamentarians are therefore free to follow their own consciences, and to support policies that allow all people to make informed, conscientious decisions about their own lives and those of their families.

Politicians the world over, Catholic and otherwise, have found that keeping to their principles and paying close attention to the views of the constituents who elected them, rather than the local Catholic bishop, have paved the way to longevity in elected office. Catholics in the pew support access to quality reproductive health-care services, with no stigma attached to those who choose abortion or those who choose to carry a pregnancy to term.



Jon O'Brien
President

Catholics for Choice is an international nongovernmental organization accredited with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. For 35 years CFC has served as a voice for Catholics who believe that the Catholic tradition supports sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being, and respect and affirm the capacity of women and men to make moral decisions about their lives.